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**AGRARIAN AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES AMONG SMALL-SCALE FARMERS: A NORTH CAROLINA CASE STUDY<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the agrarian and political attitudes of a sample of predominantly black, small-scale farmers from three North Carolina counties. Factor analysis identifies agrarian (agrarianism) and political-economic attitudes (socio-political powerlessness and stratification system illegitimacy). Regression analysis identifies the social bases of agrarianism and its relationship to socio-political powerlessness and stratification system illegitimacy. Agrarianism has a differential impact upon the legitimation of economic and political inequalities among this regionally specific segment of small farm strata.

**Introduction**

The persistence of agrarian values and beliefs in industrial societies has been an important topic of research within rural sociology. The nature and sources of agrarian beliefs have been documented among both farm operators and nonfarm residents (Buttel and Flinn, 1975; Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Johnstone, 1940; Paarlberg, 1964; Rohrer and Douglas, 1969; Singer and Sousa, 1983). Regional variations in agrarian beliefs (Carlson and McLeod, 1978; Coughenour, 1977; Smith, 1982) and the impact of agrarian beliefs on general political-economic attitudes (Buttel and Flinn, 1975, 1976; Singer and Sousa, 1983) have also been explored. Debate exists over whether the persistence of agrarian beliefs and values is due to association with other "traditional" values or with basic socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., age or education). Debate also exists over whether agrarian beliefs and values have

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conservative or progressive impacts on other political-economic beliefs.

In contemporary American society, agrarian beliefs and values are materialized in the ideology of agrarianism (also known as the agrarian myth, the Jeffersonian creed, or farm fundamentalism). Flinn and Johnson (1974) have outlined the historical origins and content of agrarianism. Basically, agrarianism rests upon the assumption that agriculture is set apart from the rest of society. The uniqueness of agricultural life conveys benefits on both its practitioners and on society as a whole. Rural and agricultural life is more natural and self-sufficient. Farmers are the exemplary defenders of American democracy.

Empirical research on agrarianism is based almost exclusively on Midwestern or Western samples. Flinn and Johnson (1974) used a statewide sample of Wisconsin farmers to identify the characteristics of agrarianism adherents. Buttel and Flinn (1975, 1976) used a statewide survey of Wisconsin residents to study the relationship between agrarianism and other socioeconomic attitudes. Carlson and McLeod (1978) compared three different samples of farmers from Idaho and Washington with the Wisconsin farm sample. Singer and Sousa (1983) investigated the sociopolitical consequences of agrarianism in a statewide sample of Ohio farmers. Noticeably absent from the empirical literature are studies of Southern farmers. Also absent from the empirical literature on agrarianism are studies of minority small-scale farmers. Given that the majority of black farmers are in the South, the Midwestern and Western studies undoubtedly contained few black farmers.

The agrarian beliefs and values of a group of farm operators seldom researched are examined here. The sample consists of small-scale, primarily black, tobacco farmers from the North Carolina Piedmont. In addition to determining the extent of manifestation of the agrarian ideology among such farm operators, hypotheses about the social bases of agrarian beliefs and the consequences of agrarian beliefs for other political-economic attitudes are tested.

Previous research has shown that agrarian beliefs and values among farm operators are related to the social and demographic characteristics of the farm operator and to the characteristics of the farm enterprise (Buttel and Flinn, 1975; Carlson and McLeod, 1978; Flinn and Johnson, 1974). From this earlier research, it is hypothesized that older, less educated farm operators with low incomes, low farm debt, smaller farm operations, and little exposure to off-farm work are the most agrarian.

The results of previous studies with regard to the consequences of agrarianism for other political-economic attitudes are somewhat ambiguous. Buttel and Flinn (1975) found that persons holding agrarian values were more highly discontent and also that rural agrarians were more highly conservative and authoritarian. In a subsequent study, Buttel and Flinn (1976) found that agrarianism was associated with political discontent, but not with economic or stratification discontent. Singer and Sousa (1983) found

that their measure of agrarianism was an important predictor of progressive political attitudes. We hypothesize that agrarianism will impact other political-economic attitudes, but that its effect may vary depending on the specific nature of the political-economic attitude under consideration.

### Data and methods

Data for this paper are based on a multidisciplinary study of technology transfer to small-scale farmers. A sample of small-scale farmers in three North Carolina counties (total N = 107, responding N = 90) were selected via a complex multistage procedure. The three counties--Person, Caswell, and Granville--were selected because of their location in the same general ecological zone (Northern Piedmont) and because of the existence of certain Agricultural Extension programs in each county.<sup>2</sup> Each farm operator in the sample was administered a survey via personal interview during the spring of 1982.

This sample represents a subset of farmers rarely studied (Brown and Larson, 1979). It includes full- and part-time small-scale farmers, the vast majority of whom are black (82 percent) and male (95 percent). The average farm size (including land owned and not owned) was 30.4 acres. Flue-cured tobacco, a labor-intensive crop, was the predominant crop grown. Average gross farm income in 1981 was \$14,759, average net farm income was \$2,520, and average

<sup>2</sup>In Caswell County, the sample is based upon those small-scale farmers who were working with the existing Extension paraprofessional program during 1981. These were farmers who were under 65 and who had under \$20,000 in annual sales. In Person and Granville Counties, samples of small-scale farmers were drawn from the farm population. First, census enumeration districts within each county were selected at random. Second, all farmers within each district were administered a short screening questionnaire. The sample of small-scale farmers was drawn from the information gathered by the screening questionnaire. A small-scale farmer was eligible if he or she met the following characteristics: (1) gross farm sales of \$20,000 or under in 1981; (2) farm operator 65 years of age or under; (3) agriculture a significant part (20 percent) of total family income. A fourth criteria, working fewer than 100 days off-the-farm for pay, was dropped after the screening data revealed that the farmers meeting the other three criteria were bimodal with regard to off-farm work; one group had fewer than 100 days, but another group had more than 200 days. It was decided to keep the group working 200 or more days off-the-farm for pay in the sample. A total of 107 small-scale farmers fell into the sample: 27 in Caswell, 41 in Person, and 39 in Granville. Ninety interviews were completed (21 in Caswell, 37 in Person, and 32 in Granville).

gross farm debt was \$9,017. Slightly over half (54 percent) of the respondents had an off-farm job, mostly in operative or craftsman and kindred worker occupations. Average education of the respondents was 8.9 years, and average age was 50.2 years. While small sample size and geographic specificity obviously limit the generalizability of results, the sample does provide the opportunity to address questions about the sources and consequences of agrarianism among small-scale farmers.

On the survey questionnaire, agrarian beliefs and values were measured with a series of 10 Likert agree-disagree items. These items, in addition to containing standard agrarianism statements derived from previous research, also contained statements measuring beliefs about risk in farming. A six-item unidimensional summated Likert-like scale was derived from the original set of 10 items by factor analysis (promax rotation).<sup>3</sup> This final scale, which was labeled agrarianism, includes several of the standard agrarianism items (Table 1--numbers 1, 3, and 6) used in previous scales and items about risk in farming (Table 1--numbers 2, 4, and 5). Inclusion of the risk items means that the agrarianism scale is not isomorphic with those constructed in other studies. However, research has shown that both agrarian beliefs and attitudes towards risk-taking are widespread among farm operators (Coughenour, 1977).

The independent variables included in the analysis are age, education, farm size, total farm debt, net farm income, and days of off-farm work. Again, it is hypothesized that older, small-scale, debt-free, less educated farmers with low sales volume and little exposure to nonfarm work and nonfarm values are the most agrarian. Details on the measurement of each of the independent variables are in the Appendix. Multiple linear regression is used to test the hypothesis about the relationship between agrarianism and the independent variables.

Two scales measuring political-economic attitudes provide the focus for the analysis of the consequences of agrarianism. Again, factor analysis was used to develop the scales from a set of 10 Likert-items. The first scale, consisting of five items measuring the respondents' feelings about their ability to influence government, is termed socio-political powerlessness. The second indicator, a stratification system illegitimacy scale, measures perceptions of the fairness of the opportunity structure. These two scales are intended to tap "dominant" (supportive of the social order) and "deviant" (critical of the social

<sup>3</sup>Different studies have used different measurement techniques in developing their agrarianism indexes. Flinn and Johnson (1974) and Carlson and McLeod (1978) constructed indexes of agrarianism based upon 11 Likert-like items. Both these studies admitted that the indexes may not be unidimensional. Buttel and Flinn (1975, 1976) utilized factor analysis to derive six-item and three-item indexes. Singer and Sousa (1983) derived a four-item index for agrarianism via factor analysis.

Table 1

**Table 1. Percentage distribution of responses:  
Items measuring agrarian norms and values**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Nei- ther	Dis- agree	Strongly dis- agree
1. The family farm is very important to democracy	10	75	11	3	1
2. The major goal of young farm families should be to stay out of debt	10	60	12	16	2
3. Agricultural life is the natural life for man	16	64	16	3	1
4. Hard work still counts for more in a successful farm operation than all the new ideas you read in the newspapers	9	69	7	13	2
5. Farmers should wait until they can accumulate their own capital rather than borrow for farm production purposes	0	17	18	57	9
6. Agriculture is the most basic occupation in our society and almost all other occupations depend on it	15	71	11	2	0

order) values about the political-economic organization of American society (Mann, 1970). The scales are constructed so that high scores represent deviant value expression (see the Appendix for details on scale construction).

### Agrarianism

The small-scale farmers in the sample manifested high levels of agrarian beliefs and values, with 70 percent or more agreeing or strongly agreeing with five of the six scale items. On one item (Table 1, number 5) the majority of small-scale farmers disagreed, possibly reflecting the necessity of borrowing money in order to maintain a farming operation.

The next task is to examine the relationship of the independent variables to agrarianism. At the bivariate level, only one of the six independent variables (education) has a statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) correlation with agrarianism (Table 2). Overall, the levels of association are low, possibly because of the relative lack of variation in the dependent variable. Generally, the small-scale farmers in the sample are clustered toward the high end of the scale.

Upon inspection of the bivariate correlations, it appears that education is the most important social base of agrarianism among small-scale farmers. However, the presence of statistically significant bivariate relationships among the independent variables raises the possibility that the association between agrarianism and any single independent variable may be spurious. Education, for example, has statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) bivariate correlations with age, total farm debt, and days of off-farm work. The actual underlying pattern of the dependence of agrarianism on these hypothesized social bases is revealed through multivariate data analysis.

Table 3 presents the results of a multiple linear regression of the independent variables on agrarianism. All of these relationships are statistically nonsignificant ( $p > .05$ ), except for education. The six variables taken together explain approximately 10 percent of the variance in agrarianism.

In order to discover why expected relationships between the independent variables and agrarianism may not have appeared, stepwise multiple regression also was employed. Only variables which make a significant autonomous contribution ( $p(F) < .05$ ) to the regression model enter the solution, and any variable is removed from the solution if the entry of another predictor reduces it to a nonsignificant level. The stepwise model revealed that education was, again, the only statistically significant predictor.

These results are consistent with previous studies of farm operators (Carlson and McLeod, 1978; Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Singer and Sousa, 1983). While the overall level of the relationships is weak (also consistent with previous studies), education is the most important social base of agrarianism. Agrarian beliefs and values are strong among

**Table 2. Intercorrelation matrix: Variables for regression analyses (N = 90)**

	Y1	Y2	Y3	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6
Agrarianism (Y1)	1.0								
Socio-political powerlessness (Y2)	.304**	1.0							
Stratification system illegitimacy (Y3)	-.025	.253*	1.0						
Net farm debt (X1)	-.131	-.113	.013	1.0					
Total farm debt (X2)	.024	.003	.068	.086	1.0				
Farm size (X3)	-.025	-.018	.130	.003	.131	1.0			
Days off-farm work (X4)	-.136	.096	.209*	-.012	.106	-.087	1.0		
Age (X5)	.042	-.117	-.095	-.083	-.118	-.049	.296**	1.0	
Education (X6)	-.222*	.069	.038	-.004	.289**	.156	-.316**	-.497***	1.0

\*p &lt; .05

\*\*p &lt; .01

\*\*\*p &lt; .001

Table 2

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Table 3

**Table 3. Multiple regression analysis of  
agrarianism on independent variables**

Independent variables	Unstan- dardized Beta	Standardized Beta	T	Sig <sup>+</sup>
Net farm income	-0.23	-0.16	-1.47	NS
Total farm debt	0.09	0.12	1.08	NS
Farm size	-0.01	-0.01	-0.10	NS
Days off-farm work	-0.12	-0.11	-0.96	NS
Age	-0.04	-0.14	-1.10	NS
Education	-0.28	-0.29	-2.28	.025

$R^2 = .10$

F ratio = 1.49

Prob F = 0.19

<sup>+</sup>NS =  $p > .05$

the sample as a whole and strongest among the less educated.

#### Political-economic attitudes

While some studies have shown that agrarianism leads to alienation, discontent, and generally progressive political outlooks, others have shown agrarianism to be associated with conservative values. Therefore, we explored the relationship between agrarianism and general political-economic attitudes.

At the bivariate level (Table 2), agrarianism has a statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) relationship with socio-political powerlessness. Socio-political powerlessness has a statistically significant relationship with stratification system illegitimacy. The possibility exists, however, that the relationships between agrarianism and the political-economic attitude scales are spurious or suppressed because of association with the other independent variables. Multiple regression was employed to resolve this issue.

The results of the multiple regression models for each of the two political-economic attitudinal scales are given in Table 4. The variable of days off-farm work is the statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) predictor of stratification system illegitimacy at the multivariate level. For the socio-political powerlessness scale, agrarianism is the significant predictor. Stepwise multiple regression showed the same models. These results lend support to the hypothesis that agrarianism leads to increasing political discontent, but not necessarily to greater economic discontent (Buttel and Flinn, 1976). Rather, exposure to off-farm work heightened respondents' perceptions of the unfairness of the stratification system.

#### Summary and conclusions

Analysis of data from a sample of small-scale farm operators in North Carolina revealed strong expression of agrarian beliefs and values. Education was the most important predictor of agrarianism among this sample. The results lend support to the interpretation of agrarianism as a refuge-type ideology, stronger among older, poorer, less educated farmers, that makes an "unbearable situation saintly, by transforming the rigors of hard life into virtue" (Flinn and Johnson, 1974:200).

What kind of impact does agrarianism have on political-economic attitudes? In this sample, agrarianism had little impact on beliefs concerning economic inequality (e.g., stratification system illegitimacy). Rather, the impact of agrarianism was limited to beliefs about the distribution of power and the ability to influence government (socio-political powerlessness). These results support the thesis that agrarian beliefs and values have generally progressive consequences for political-economic attitudes. However, the specific impact of agrarianism varies with the type of political-economic attitude under consideration. In other words, agrarianism has a differential impact; it serves to

Table 4

**Table 4. Multiple regression analysis measures of political-economic attitudes on independent variables**

Independent variables	Unstan- dardized Beta	Standardized Beta	T	Sig <sup>+</sup>
<u>Socio-political powerlessness</u>				
Net farm income	-0.14	-0.69	-0.66	NS
Total farm debt	-0.04	-0.04	-0.39	NS
Farm size	-0.01	-0.02	-0.14	NS
Days off-farm work	0.13	0.09	0.84	NS
Age	-0.02	-0.06	-0.52	NS
Education	0.12	0.10	0.74	NS
Agrarianism	0.43	0.33	3.07	.003
R <sup>2</sup> = .13				
F ratio = 1.78				
Prob F = .10				
<u>Stratification system illegitimacy</u>				
Net farm income	0.01	0.01	0.04	NS
Total farm debt	0.04	0.04	0.40	NS
Farm size	0.01	0.16	1.43	NS
Days off-farm work	0.26	0.23	1.96	.05
Age	-0.02	-0.05	-0.46	NS
Education	-0.10	-0.10	-0.72	NS
Agrarianism	-0.01	-0.01	-0.09	NS
R <sup>2</sup> = .07				
F ratio = .92				
Prob F = .49				

+NS = p &gt; .05

delegitimate dominant beliefs concerning political inequality while having little or no impact on dominant beliefs concerning economic inequality.

While agrarianism manifests statistically significant relationships with beliefs about political inequality, the overall levels of the relationships are low. This may indicate that agrarianism, as a political ideology, is relatively isolated from other political-economic attitudes among small-scale farmers. Studies of political beliefs and values demonstrate that value consensus among the populations of advanced industrial societies does not exist (Della Fave, 1983; Guest, 1974; Mann, 1970). Rather than consensus and consistency, "confusion" and dissensus are characteristic; support for both dominant and deviant values coexist. If attitudinal "confusion" is common, particularly among dominated classes, then the relationship between agrarian and political attitudes should be weak.

Other interpretations of the overall low levels of the relationships between agrarianism and hypothesized independent variables and between agrarianism and the political-economic attitude scales exist. Measurement error and the small size of the sample are possible causes of these negative results. Another possible cause of the negative results, however, is that the items used to measure agrarianism in this study are really inappropriate for farm operators from the South.

Smith (1982), utilizing historical and literary sources, argues that there are regional variants of the agrarian ideology in the United States, each with a different historical context and meaning. Yankee agrarianism stresses modernity, increased production, moral excellence through labor, and the wholesomeness of the farm occupation. Southern agrarianism stresses moral excellence in living in nature, opposition to the increasing role of government, and the centrality of the traditional family and peer group. Both regional variants of agrarianism stress self-sufficiency and individual freedom, according to Smith.

The items used to measure agrarianism in this study were derived from previous studies of Midwestern farm operators. That is, they were based on the Yankee version of agrarianism and therefore did not measure the core values of Smith's (1982) Southern version. Thus, the weak statistical relationships of this study may result from the lack of regionally appropriate measures. Further studies of agrarianism among farm operators from the South should attempt to measure both Yankee and Southern versions of the agrarian ideology to ascertain if such variants actually exist.

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#### **Appendix: Operationalizations of variables**

**Farm size:** Total number of acres farmed in 1981 including land owned and not owned (a mean of 30.4 and a median of 18.5 for the sample)

Days off-farm work: Respondents were asked if they had a nonfarm job in 1981 and if yes, the number of days they worked off the farm (not counting custom work). Those with no off-farm work were coded 0 and the rest were coded as follows: 1 (1-49 days); 2 (50-99 days); 3 (100-149 days); 4 (150-199 days); 5 (200 or more days). The category mean for the sample was 2.4.

Age: Respondents were asked the year they were born. The mean age was 50.2 years with a range of 26 to 65 years.

Education: This was measured with a direct question asking for the highest grade of school completed. The mean was 8.9 with a range from 2 to 16.

Total farm debt: Respondents were asked a direct question about the total farm debt in 1981 and were asked to choose among 10 categories, the lowest being \$999 or less and the highest \$50,000 or more. Those reporting no debt were assigned a score of zero. The mean for the sample was \$9,017 with a range from 0 to 10.

Net farm income: Measured with a direct question about the approximate net farm income in 1981. Respondents were asked to choose among 10 categories. Those reporting costs exceeding income or breaking even were assigned a score of zero. The mean for the sample was \$2,520 with a range from 0 to 7 (\$15,000 - \$19,999).

Agrarianism: Measured with a summated Likert-like scale of six items (see Table 1 for individual items). The scale ranged from 14 to 28 with a mean of 21.5, a median of 24.9, a standard deviation of 2.58, and a variance of 7.8.

Socio-political powerlessness: Measured with a five-item summated Likert-like scale. The items composing the scale include: "I do not think people in government care much about what people like me think;" "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person cannot really understand what's going on;" "A poor person does not stand a fair chance in the law courts;" "People like me do not have any say about what the government does;" "This world is run by a few people in power and there is not much a little person can do about it." Respondents agreeing with the statements, indicating high powerlessness (deviant value expression), were assigned high scores. The scale had a range of 9-25, with a mean of 19.05 and a standard deviation of 3.35.

Stratification system illegitimacy: Measured with a four-item summated Likert-like scale. The items composing the scale include: "Nowadays luck and pull are more important in determining who gets ahead than ability or hard work;" "The children of farmers have the same opportunities as the children of professionals to enter the top occupations;" "America is the place where any person can get ahead, no matter if they come from a rich or poor family;" "The average citizen can have influence on government decisions." Respondents answering skeptically with regards to equal opportunity and influence (deviant value expression) were assigned high scores. This procedure yielded a scale ranging from 6 to 20, with a mean of 12.32 and a standard deviation of 2.75.